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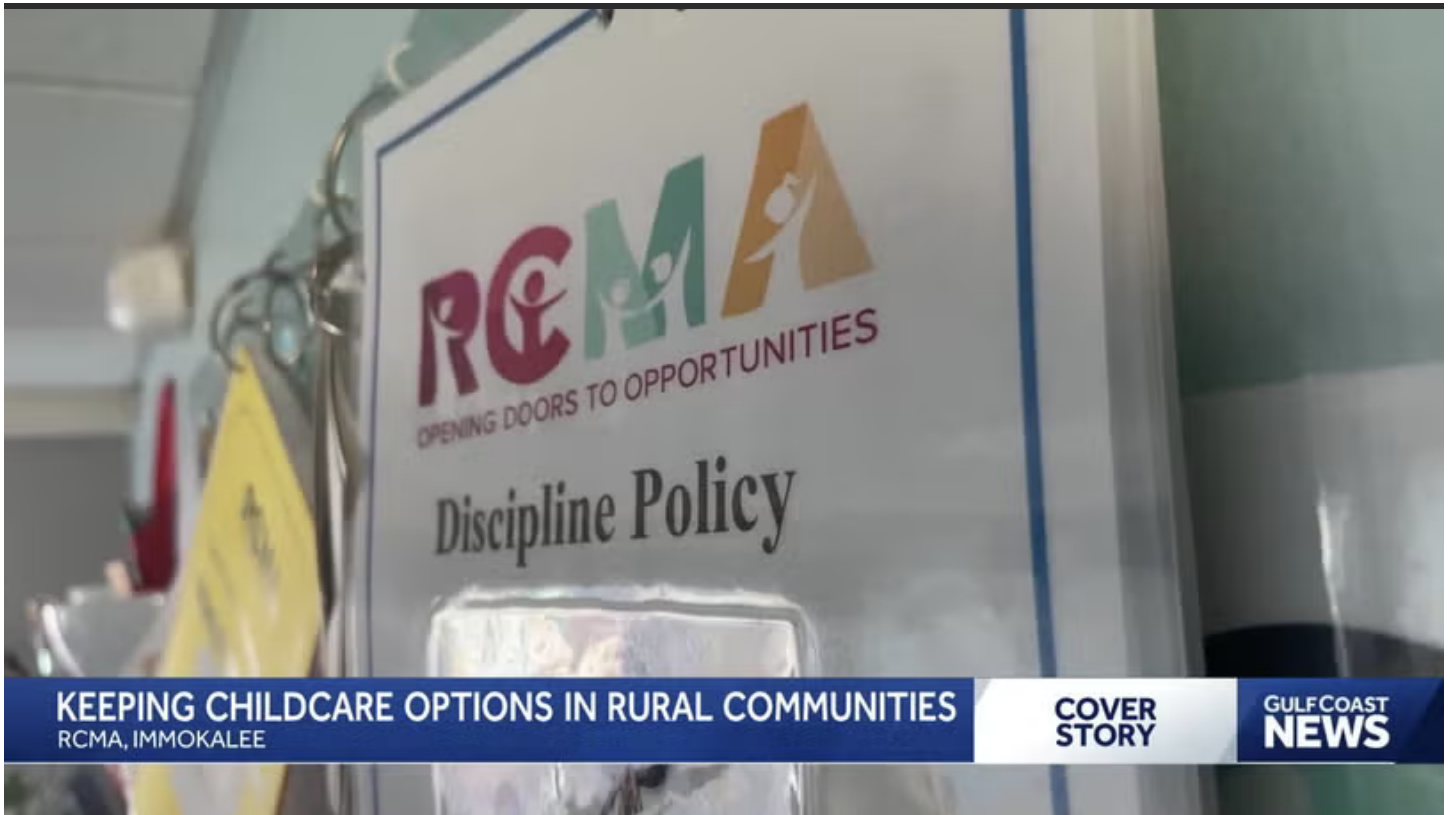


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Last-minute relief: Held-up federal funds reinstated for RCMA Head Start programs

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Anchor

With federal funding cuts to several organizations, many programs that rely on federal funding have had to scale back.

In just the past week, ripple effects from the lack of funding have been felt across the country and even on the Gulf Coast.

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One of those programs was the National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Program, which

funds early childhood education at the Redlands Christian Migrant Association Offices in Immokalee.

Just this past week, the RCMA, which offers childcare for migrants working in agriculture, temporarily laid off dozens of staff members, and suspended childcare for more than 250 children, after fears over federal funds being withheld, which have since been reinstated.

When we visited the RCMA Early Childhood Education Center in Immokalee this week, things were looking pretty grim.

"This is exactly what it looks like, no children, no staff..." said Isabel Garcia, the program's executive director.

Normally, a visit to a day care center on a Wednesday at noon would be a noisy affair, but instead classrooms were quiet and empty.

Sixty-five percent of RCMA's funding comes through federal grants — about \$13 million per year. But this year, that money didn't come in on time.

"When we noticed that we have not received a notice of reward or a balance of funds, we became concerned and reached out to our federal offices, and asked where is our notice of federal funds? And we were told they have not been given the green light from anyone in the federal government to release the funds," Garcia explained.

The delayed funds forced RCMA to make a difficult decision.

"I knew that I only had enough funding left that would take us through the paid day of March 31. Therefore, if we did not receive our funds, we could not continue our services, so I had to make the decision of closing temporarily our programs here in Immokalee effective April 1," she said.

Garcia sent dozens of staff members home and told hundreds of working families they had to find alternative child care. She says it was an incredibly tough call to make because it left

families with little to no options.

"Because they still have to go to work in the field, they have to go pick the crops, they are not able to call in sick, because the work is there, if they don't pick, they don't have income," Garcia said. "It's critical, because the families depend on child care so they can go out and pick the crops that are provided to families in Collier County."

It was a dire situation for many families who rely on child care in order to work.

"At the end of the day, children are left without safe or quality child care, and parents are left having to find babysitters," Garcia said.

That was, until Friday afternoon, when RCMA announced they had received the delayed funding for the children in the program. With their problems solved, we followed up with the team at RCMA; they sent us this statement:

"We are pleased to announce that the funding has now been received, and that all affected programs and staff will be reinstated beginning Monday."

"In Collier County, we have 250 children, about 117 staff, and it's about a \$6 million budget," Garcia said.

All of those children and staff will be back to work come Monday. But even though this story has a happy ending, Garcia knows it came close to disaster for rural communities.

"These decisions that are made at the federal level, they do trickle down and do impact and create consequences. Even though they might be unintended, they do impact local communities," she said.

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